# Introduction: Beyond the Novelty Effect

Jan Baetens, Éric Trudel


L'Esprit Créateur, Volume 53, Number 3, Fall 2013, pp. 1-8 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
*DOI:* *https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2013.0032*

# Introduction: Beyond the Novelty Effect

**Jan Baetens and Éric Trudel**

IN THE HIGH-MODERNIST ERA (1910-1940), Ezra Pound's rallying cry, "make it new," appeared to be a more or less unchallenged dogma. In light of this typically modern, if not avant-garde belief in rupture with tradition and drive for innovation and constant change, the whole history of Western literature has often—and perhaps too often—been rethought as an action-reaction chain of never-ending transformations. If, as we all know, history is written by the sole victorious forces, the literary winner that generally takes it all is without any doubt the avant-garde; although it should not be forgotten that this victorious avant-garde is a particularly depoliticized and normalized one. Interestingly, this focus on innovation did not have the same teleological undertone in literature that it possessed in the visual arts. Literature was undoubtedly changing, but it was not believed to be changing in order to discover its own 'essence,' as was the case in painting and sculpture, for instance. There have been many literary critics and theoreticians who claimed literature for literature's sake all along the nineteenth and twentieth century, as well as countless defenders of 'literariness,' but there has never really been a *literary* Clement Greenberg.[1]

This important difference has probably much to do with the internal structure of verbal language on the one hand and of visual arts on the other, since the production of meaning obeys radically different regimes in both sign systems, as Émile Benveniste has convincingly demonstrated in a still much-read 1966 article, "Sémiologie de la langue."[2] It cannot suffice, however, to rely upon these internal differences to understand why literary change has always presented a more complex form than the dialectic supersession model of the old being swiftly replaced by the new. The fundamental reason for literature's historical complexity is rooted in the multiple functions that literature has been playing for at least the last three centuries. True, it is possible to sketch a genealogy of literary functions in terms of an ever-growing sense of 'autonomy,' as analyzed by William Marx in his ground-breaking essay *L'Adieu à la littérature*.[3] In this book, Marx questions the progressive fading of literature as a culturally dominant as well as socially relevant practice, and he interprets this disappearance as the flip side of literature's claim of autonomy (and, conversely, its loss of heteronomy). The more literature adopted an art for art's sake ideology, and the more it became self-conscious and self-reflective, the lesser its impact on society became—as did its presence on the social, cultural, and political agenda.[4]

© L'Esprit Créateur, Vol. 53, No. 3 (2013), pp. 1–8

Yet the same William Marx is also the editor of a seminal collection of essays devoted to the so-called "arrière-garde" (rearguard) in literature, *Les Arrière-gardes au XX^e siècle*,[5] which endeavours to nuance the teleology of traditional literary historiography whereby modernism and the avant-garde are described as radically innovative. This account of an era characterized by a growing distance from and distaste for old forms, contents, and vehicles, slowly but irremediably abandoned by the spirit of the times as new forms, contents, and vehicles emerge in full support of innovation's credo, is well known. Reality, however, proves hard to keep within a single simple mould. If at first sight the term "arrière-garde," this "hidden face" of literary modernity as Marx calls it, seems to refer to an anti-avant-garde, designating either a literary movement that is unable to keep in touch with the present or a movement that explicitly turns to the past, Marx invites us to resist conceiving of it strictly as the opposite term of avant-garde. In fact, *arrière-garde* in military jargon also refers to a specific section of the marching troop, namely the section that must protect and consolidate—we would say nowadays *institutionalize*—the progress made by the latter. Thus, the sense of belatedness vis-à-vis revolutionary changes as well as nostalgia vis-à-vis outdated literary models prove to be not incompatible, in practice, with innovative and in various cases even revolutionary tendencies, for instance when certain arrière-gardes try to preserve the heritage of previous avant-gardes or when they reuse older forms in order to build experimental new programs. Marjorie Perloff, for example, recently has provided us with an excellent case of such a "progressive" reading of the arrière-garde as a second avant-garde in her work on Brazilian concrete poetry[6] (and Hal Foster, in another context and more than fifteen years ago, famously demonstrated how an examination of this "becoming-institutional" of the avant-garde could help us establish "new genealogies" of it[7]). Similar ambiguities have been foregrounded by Antoine Compagnon in his book on *Les Antimodernes,*[8] where the prefix "anti" is not to be read in purely oppositional terms. Antimoderns are not hostile to modernity and the avant-garde; rather, they try to negotiate—and this, as well, belongs to a paradigm of institutionalization—between the old and the new. In French literature, the leading figure of Jean Paulhan, the influential editor of *La Nouvelle Revue française*, whose work and person summarized so many of the productive tensions of twentieth-century literature, is an inspiring example of such an antimodern stance, one that many other writers also adopted;[9] for they did not stand as straightforward apologists of modernity but instead aimed to reflect upon and even criticize multiple aspects of the modern condition, including the desire for radical innovation with which they were often associated.

The complexities of such a negotiation, at times mournful and melancholic, were perhaps best captured by Roland Barthes who claimed in 1971—after the heyday of structuralism and the *Nouveau Roman*—that his most pressing wish was to situate himself, from now on, "at the rearguard of the avant-garde." If this was, to some, a perplexing and somewhat paradoxical position, it was also one that he seemed incapable, at this point in his life, of not adopting: "être d'avant-garde," he movingly wrote, "c'est savoir ce qui est mort; être d'arrière-garde, c'est l'aimer encore."[10] Guillaume Apollinaire, in fact, had already expressed this Janus-like stance in the memorable last few lines of "Liens," the inaugural and somewhat programmatic poem of his *Calligrammes* (1918), with words that would be echoed by Barthes in a strikingly similar fashion several decades later:

> Ô sens ô sens chéris
> Ennemis du souvenir
> Ennemis du désir
>
> Ennemis du regret
> Ennemis des larmes
> Ennemis de tout ce que j'aime encore[11]

The shifting functions of literature are more diverse, however, than the general opposition between autonomy and heteronomy, or the permanent juxtaposition, co-presence, battle, and dialogue between the old and the new, innovative and conservative tendencies in writing. What has come increasingly to the fore in recent years is the very impossibility of disentangling these antagonistic trends in literature. The long-time accepted trust in the value of autonomy and the accompanying refusal of any dependence on extraliterary—social, political, ideological—powers and objectives have now been shattered, and in retrospect we can only acknowledge the limits of such a narrow interpretive frame. In any case, the avant-garde itself is definitely not a good example of such a claim for complete autonomy. To a large extent, one may even argue quite easily that the avant-garde, on the contrary, has always craved literature's re-heteronomization. Popular literature as well, to mention another field of literary production, is light-years away from autonomy: its first aim has always been to entertain (although its impact often went far beyond mere entertainment). The same remark may also be applied to mainstream literature, which has never severed its ties with societal agendas. The blurring of boundaries between autonomy and heteronomy does not only mean, however, that innovative authors, styles, groups, texts, etc., had to cope

with previously existing—and actively resisting!—older features. It also implies the possibility, and no doubt even the necessity, of embracing novelties. Indeed, autonomous literature is by no means always progressive. It can bask in the retrograde adoration of worn-out glories. Conversely, it is only too obvious that heteronomous literature is by no means always nostalgic. It can be on the frontline of innovation. Along similar lines, the progressive agenda of a literary movement may suppose the rediscovery or upgrading of traditional or low-brow forms. Antonio Gramsci's plea for what he called a "national-popular" literature, a type of literary production we would label "middle-brow quality," Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's choice of a straightforward, overly didactic, and almost antiliterary transparent style in his neohumanist writings defending the machine, or Léon-Paul Fargue's reappropriation (and perhaps radicalization) of a kind of Surrealist automatic writing in prose in some of his most nostalgic intimate writings can all be cited as examples of the inescapable paradoxes of innovation in the period of allegedly triumphant Modernism.[12]

Besides these shifting functionalities, we would do well to acknowledge another dimension of literature that prevents this linear and homogeneous historiographical model from prevailing: literature's multiple mediatizations. Literature—as it has become increasingly clear in the last few decades—is never, materially speaking, just a text. Not only because this text can perfectly be a non-written one (take sound poetry for instance, which is almost impossible to transcribe in verbal keys) or even a non-linguistic one (it is generally accepted today that wordless graphic novels, from Frans Masereel to Chris Ware, should be considered part of the literary corpus of the twentieth century[13]). But also because such a text does not exist as long as it is not embodied. In order to write, record, retrieve, read, circulate, and copy a text, one has to materialize it within a given medium (and one's memory, as in the case of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, is obviously a medium as well). Yet the encounter of text and medium technology always gives a supplementary twist to the complexity of change in literature. Just as the history of photography has been thoroughly revised thanks to insights coming from the field of medium history (the history of photography is no longer the history of pictures and photographers, but among other things the history of photography in book or in print, photography in archives, photography in exhibits, digital photography, etc.),[14] literary history is entering a new phase that makes room for the interaction between text and mediatization. This rethinking of history should go beyond the mere integration of book history and printing technology, whose influence on literary style and production is widely recognized.

This rethinking should also include aspects such as the migration of literary content to other media, as occurs for instance in adaptation studies.[15] In addition, these media often have a history of their own, which may outstrip literary change itself (the case of digital technologies is suggestive in this regard, since literary production lags behind what technology can offer).

Although the various challenges that the recent and on-going mediatization of literature presents to contemporary literary historians and critics are not specifically addressed by this issue of *L'Esprit Créateur,* the ten essays that follow do share a similar ambition: to disclose some of the historical ambivalences, paradoxes, and complexities of literary change and innovation, and to do so by focusing on a key period that has seemed unproblematically homogeneous for too long. For, in practice, and as all the essays collected here demonstrate, things are never as clear-cut as the all too common traditional, linear narrative would have us believe. Thus the first half of the twentieth century, far from coming down to a single confrontation between the old and the new, between two clear and distinct groups of authors and texts (modernists and antimoderns, avant-garde and arrière-garde), would appear to exhibit a series of literary and linguistic practices in which the divergent tendencies of innovation and tradition intermingle and intersect in unexpected and productive ways.

In the opening essay, Michel Lacroix proposes an alternative history of literary modernity—one that takes into account most especially the various modes of sociability of the avant-garde—by focusing on the example of *La Nouvelle Revue française*. Although the editorial team of the *NRF* exhibited a true solidarity, it never conceived of itself, by contrast to the various neighboring avant-gardes, as a community speaking with one voice; in fact, plurality and mobility, as Lacroix insists, were constantly favored, amounting to a dialogism that didn't shy away from contradictions. This complex logic of solidarity is particularly manifest, as Lacroix goes on to show, in the pages the *NRF* devoted to literary criticism and literary reviews. Far from being simply an "arrière-garde," Lacroix suggests, the famed journal should be viewed as a "flanc-garde" that challenged the usual practices of those literary groups that characterized the landscape of twentieth-century French literature. Next, Sjef Houppermans considers the paradoxical admiration several young artists and writers of the avant-garde had for their elder Raymond Roussel, whose output may have been of striking and perplexing originality, but whose views and literary affinities, far from being revolutionary, prompted him to take Victor Hugo or Jules Verne as models. As Houppermans submits, the famous "procédé" that constitutes the matrix of Roussel's entire œuvre and the engine of continued

radical innovation may be best re-examined in light of a mid-nineteenth-century dictionary the author cherished above all others, the *Bescherelle*.

The next two pieces turn to two female writers of the early decades of the twentieth century who have generally been neglected or quite simply forgotten. Anne Reverseau revisits the works of baroness Hélène d'Œttingen, focusing on the short prose texts, novels, and travel narratives she published under the pseudonym Roch Grey, in order to reread them in the larger context of the relative failure of modernism to take root in France. Roch Grey's poetics, as Reverseau demonstrates, not only embodies the many contradictions that plagued French modernism, but warrants true scholarly scrutiny for the novel ways it leads her to conceive of what Reverseau terms "descriptive lyricism." Meanwhile, David Martens and Andrea Oberhuber review the artistic itinerary and literary output of Valentine de Saint-Point—who was, or so claimed Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the "first futurist woman." Their article probes the flagrant tension between her avant-garde discursive strategies—she authored, among other texts, various manifestos—and her sustained commitment to outdated—and many would say reactionary—values that she believed were timeless but that may be best explained, as the authors argue, by her own aristocratic *Weltanschauung*.

Similarly, Sascha Bru and Bart Van den Bossche, in re-examining Renato Poggioli's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1962) in light of Vilfredo Pareto's sociology, remind us that Poggioli's influential text, far from underlining the importance of rupture and innovation in the avant-garde, sought first and foremost to uncover, as Poggioli put it, "the eminently aristocratic nature of avant-gardism." Bru and Van den Bossche then go on to test Poggioli's historiographical and theoretical perspective by setting up the Futurist Marinetti as a problematic case study. Virginie Pouzet-Duzer for her part traces "cannibalism" both as a trope reappearing from the early twentieth century onward, and as a peculiar creative practice, to show how various avant-gardes—most notably Dada, Surrealism, and the Brazilian movement Antropofagia—successively and successfully challenged, appropriated, and revived the violent destructive energy and revolutionary ambition (and capital) of their predecessors by feasting on them. This consuming process, amounting to a kind of cultural cannibalism, provides, Pouzet-Duzer argues, an unexpected model for rethinking the fraught issue of legacy in the context of the avant-garde, and invites us to expand our understanding of the relationship between old and new, past and present, continuation and confrontation.

We are presented with another complex case of appropriation and self-construction when Thangam Ravindranathan unexpectedly traces the origins

of Henri Michaux's *Plume* back to Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether." Doing so not only allows her to highlight better the centrality of "Le Drame des constructeurs" in Michaux's œuvre, a play written in 1930 and to which very little critical attention has been paid until now, but also helps us better understand the writer's dissatisfaction with, and suspicion of, contemporaneous avant-gardes, most notably the surrealists who at the time were dreaming of direct and immediate self-expression in *écriture automatique* and attempting to experiment with what Michaux considered mere simulations of madness. Interestingly, in choosing to underline Georges Bataille's often disconcerting "classicism" and deep stylistic preoccupations, Michèle Richman also asks us to reconsider the importance of inherited forms and syntactical structures in Bataille's idea of how best to express a poetic sensibility. Her rich analysis in fact sheds new light on the avant-garde's frequent aspiration to what would amount to a universal language, since Bataille's urgent "cries," as Richman shows, are not reducible to spontaneous *élans,* but were on the contrary quite carefully constructed and should be understood instead as instances of heightened self-awareness and disruption, when an archaic past is being mobilized in the service of an *expérience intérieure*.

By underlining the importance of the reference to mysticism for Antonin Artaud and defining him as a heretic—a marginal figure understood here as being situated precisely on the line that separates tradition and modernity and through which the past cycles back into in the present—Maxime Philippe carries this investigation of a poetic *expérience* further and reassesses at once Artaud's singular account of the history of Surrealism and his revolutionary project, one that was predicated, as Philippe makes clear, on an embodied conception of the "revolution" that ran counter to Breton's. Finally, Jason Earle returns to a well-known chapter in the history of Surrealism—the uneasy passage from the *Premier Manifeste* (1924) to the *Second* (1930), in which Breton famously attempted to align surrealists with the French Communist Party and, in the process, violently abandoned writers such as Artaud and Bataille "silencieusement à leur propre sort."[16] Earle reveals the aporetic tension that existed between the group's desire for overt political action and its competing impulse toward occultation and secrecy. Recalling, after Bru and Van den Bossche, Poggioli's characterization of the avant-garde as "aristocratic and solitary" by nature, Earle re-articulates, through the figure of the secret society, the theory and practice of Surrealism, split, as it were, between a form of hermeticism inherited from the past and hopes of a revolutionary renewal. It is surely fitting that, in concluding this issue of *L'Esprit Créateur*

on a specific mode of literary sociability—the secret society—Earle's inquiry circles back to Michel Lacroix's contribution and thus to our point of departure. For, if we may be permitted to take the situationist Guy Debord at his word and quote here the conclusion of his superb and melancholic magnum opus of 1978, the film *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*, the history of the avant-garde, it would seem, is always "à reprendre depuis le début."

*University of Leuven (MDRN[17]) and Bard College*

## *Notes*

1. Perhaps the one who came closest to Greenberg's positions was Jean Ricardou in the 1960s and early 1970s. But his stances on medium-specificity were much less rigid and teleologically oriented than those of Greenberg.
2. First published in *Semiotica*, 1:1 (1969): 1-12.
3. *L'Adieu à la littérature* (Paris: Minuit, 2005).
4. The literature Marx is thinking of is of course French literature and, to a certain extent, European literature. A different, although not completely different, history of literature's place in society should be written for the US context. A fascinating attempt in this direction has been made by Mark McGurl in his study *The Program Era* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 2009), which reframes the history of literary writing from the perspective of the academic creative writing programs.
5. *Les Arrière-gardes au XX^e siècle* (2004) (Paris: PUF, 2008).
6. See especially chapter 3, "From Avant-Garde to Digital," in Marjorie Perloff's *Unoriginal Genius* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010).
7. Hal Foster, "Who's Afraid of the New-Avant-Garde?", *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).
8. *Les Antimodernes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).
9. See Éric Trudel, *La Terreur à l'œuvre: théorie, poétique et éthique chez Jean Paulhan* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2007).
10. Roland Barthes, "Réponses," *Œuvres complètes,* vol. 3 (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 1038.
11. Guillaume Apollinaire, "Liens," *Œuvres poétiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 167.
12. See Jean-François Hamel's *Revenances de l'histoire: répétition, narrativité, modernité* (Paris: Minuit, 2006), in which the author demonstrates how modernity implements against this teleological model a narrative of mourning, made of repetitions and cycles, where past and future are "inverted" until the living and the dead become indistinguishable.
13. On the tradition of wordless narrative, see David Beronå, *Wordless Books: The Original Graphic Novels* (New York: Abrams, 2008).
14. See Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, *The Photobook: A History 1* (London: Phaidon, 2004) and Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographs and Historical Imagination, 1885-1918* (Durham: Duke U P, 2011).
15. See the journal *Adaptations*, published by Oxford U P, and its accompanying portal site, http://adaptation.oxfordjournals.org/.
16. André Breton, "Second manifeste du surréalisme," *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 786.
17. MDRN is a large-scale research project on transformations in twentieth-century European literature funded by KU Leuven. See http://www.mdrn.be.